

Time Zones

by
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The seat belt signs light up overhead as the plane jolts once, then again. In the aisle, a flight attendant stumbles against an empty seat, then continues forward with her open garbage bag, collecting plastic cups and honey-roasted peanut wrappers. Over the intercom the captain announces that the plane is riding the edge of a storm. It looks to me like we're in the middle of it. Rain streams across my window in thin rivulets. The dense clouds blanketing the plane flash with lightning, reminding me of old "Twilight Zone" episodes in which the galaxy would glow with bursts of electricity, heralding some cosmic disturbance. Against the gray dark left after the lightning, I glimpse my reflection: the suit and tie, the prematurely thinning hair above my temples, the black rims of my glasses. I stare at myself in the plastic pane, trying to see the look in my eyes, but everything else is in shadow.

When the plane drops suddenly, the woman sitting next to me grips the armrest between us. After an uncertain moment the plane stabilizes. Even then she holds on, her knuckles white. She glances at my unbuckled seat belt, then up at my face. I don't look back. She has already told me about her daughter's bicycle accident. I've already heard her anger and helplessness because her daughter didn't wear her helmet. That's where she's flying now, to see her daughter in the hospital. I told her my father will meet me when we land in Chicago, before I take another plane to Seattle to do some consulting for a fledgling communications company. I didn't volunteer that it will be the first time, with one exception, that I will have seen him since my mother died, more than four years ago. The plane falls again, plunging down through the air for several long seconds, then catches itself and pulls up, forging ahead. I love traveling by plane.

One summer my father and I rode the Sky Diver at the county fair. I was eight; I don't remember which town we were living in that year. As the giant Ferris wheel turned slowly forward on its axis, we whirled the steering wheel in our locked cage, spinning ourselves in sideways circles and yelling like crazy. Once, the ride stopped while we were at the top of the circle. We kept our cage balanced upside down, and I hung from the padded bar locked against our stomachs, my head, arms, and legs dangling in the air. Then I found I could slip out from beneath the bar and lie flat on

the ceiling of the cage. Against my back, I could feel the hinges where the cage opened. I looked at my father pinned to the seat above me, felt the cage rock gently in the wind. I wanted to look down through the wire mesh to see how far away the ground was, and at the same time I was afraid to. Dad grunted and pulled me up toward him. He held me tightly against his wide chest, and then without warning he let me drop back to the ceiling of the cage. I landed hard; it knocked the breath out of me. I didn't understand what had happened, why he had let me go. But when the ride started up again, I stood and grabbed the steering wheel, turning it and us in the air. My father pushed my hands away and spun the wheel as hard as he could, and I began to laugh, and then I couldn't stop, as I was thrown off balance and tossed inside our cage like clothes in a dryer.

When we emerged from the ride, my mother took one look at me and asked my father what had happened. I was surprised that it showed. I thought my face looked like it always did, while inside I was euphoric. He, of course, didn't answer her. My mother didn't persist, and the three of us went off to buy cotton candy. The next day I discovered tender purplish bruises on my arms and legs, but they hardly mattered. Or rather, they mattered only as proof of something, though I couldn't have said what. I didn't show them to my mother, who would have blamed my father. When I came home from playing in the ravine behind our house, I told her I had fallen. It occurs to me only now that she didn't believe me. Bruises don't appear right away.

Ariana doesn't like bruises either. When we make love, she won't do anything that will show up on our bodies the next day. But she's spontaneous, and she likes an adventure, and that's more than I can say about my earlier girlfriends.

It took me two months to discover Ariana's limit. One weekend we drove her car up to Ocean City in scorching July heat. On Saturday a storm kept us inside our beachfront motel room all day. We watched TV and played double solitaire while the rain blew in gusts against the window. On Sunday the sky was still gray, but the humidity made us sticky with sweat. I wanted one swim before we left; I hadn't swum in the ocean since I'd lived on Cape Cod the summer after I graduated from college, four years before.

The beach was almost deserted. Driftwood and tangles of seaweed left by the storm littered the damp sand. The ocean waves piled on top of each other and churned up sand as they fell. I waded out to dive into each curl of water as it broke. Sometimes I let the waves slam down on top of me, trying to withstand their weight. I watched Ariana dive like a seal and surface on the far side of a wave, then turn back and grin at me. I swam out after her.

We had underestimated the strength of the undertow. Ariana realized what was happening before I did and called to me to swim back toward the shore. I

couldn't get in past the waves. She's a strong swimmer, but I learned only rudimentary strokes in public pools as a child. I had no strength, and soon my arms ached. It occurred to me that I might never be able to pull myself through the roiling water back to dry land. When Ariana began yelling at me to keep swimming I realized she couldn't get back in either. I yelled back at her to shut up, she was wasting her breath. A wave hit me full in the face, and I gagged, salt water flooding down my throat and up my nose. Another wave crashed on top of me. I went under, knowing I would not come up again. I stopped struggling. The current rolled me underwater, pulled me back out with it. I was caught and spun around in a heavy curl of water, and then I was rolling against a hard surface, pebbles scraping my arms, my knees, the side of my face. I crawled up the beach, water hissing around me and back into the sea.

Gulping air into my aching lungs, I looked around for Ariana. She had washed ashore several yards away. When I reached her, she was on her hands and knees coughing up sea water. She looked up at me, her wet hair hanging in strands over her eyes. I held out my hand, pulled her to her feet, and we staggered back to the dunes and lay down there, holding each other. Neither of us said anything for a long time. I could feel her thudding heart beneath her cold skin. I couldn't keep from smiling. My skin felt like a flimsy casing that exhilaration might easily rip open and spill out of. Ariana's shoulders started shaking. She had begun to cry.

"We could have died." Her voice was almost inaudible against my neck.

"Yes," I said. "Yes." I could hardly speak.

She moved her head, leaving a dull burning where her cheek had been. "I gave up, Rick. I couldn't fight it anymore, and I gave up." She sounded surprised, as though she had made a discovery about herself. "I've never been so scared in my whole life."

I held her tighter, whispering, "I know," my body singing with that fear.

I was trembling. I could still feel the sea inside me, me inside the sea, drowning. Ariana had been with me; she knew how close we had come to dying. We had shared it together. I had never felt closer to anyone.

"That was so stupid of us," she said. She shifted and raised her head, and we watched each other. Whatever she saw in my face made her add, "You liked it. Didn't you."

I didn't say anything. The answer wasn't yes or no.

She pulled back out of my arms and sat up, pushing her wet hair behind her ears. Then she said, not looking at me, "Sometimes I think you have a death wish because your mother died."

I sat up too and said, "I guess I can see how you'd think that." I didn't really. I never talked about my mother with Ariana. I hadn't thought much about her since she

had died. My most vivid memories of my mother were those of the three of us crammed in the car packed with all our belongings, driving to a new town because my father had gotten tired of the one we were in. She would coax us to look for vanity license plates or a certain color car as a way to pass the time. We were probably, all three of us, most happy on those drives, full of hope. In the houses we lived in, she and I mostly stayed apart, calling to each other from different rooms, waiting separately for him to come home from his job or a bar late at night.

On the beach, the sun had come out. Ariana and I lay back on the sand. I reached over and took her hand, gritty with wet sand. She pulled her hand away and laid it on her stomach, sliding it over the blue nylon of her bathing suit.

When we were driving back to Baltimore that night, Ariana said, "I don't want to see you for a while, Rick. I need to think things over."

I nodded. I had heard this before, and not only from other women. My mother had repeatedly threatened my father with leaving, especially when he wanted to move again. Instead of arguing with her or pleading with her to stay, he would take me out with him to dive from the highest quarry ledges into the still water below or, at night, walk down the middle yellow lines of dark roads, letting the cars whiz by us on either side. When we returned, giddy, almost unable to stand, she'd silently take us back into the house, and that was that.

I am one of the last passengers to leave the plane. The terminal building at O'Hare is too brightly lit and at the same time strangely quiet, muffled. I don't recognize my father at first. He is standing with a small group of people waiting for other arriving passengers, his hand resting on a stroller.

My father looks old. When I last saw him, two years ago at his wedding, I noticed the first streaks of gray in his hair. He married a woman named Gina whom he had met at a coffee shop near his apartment. I can't remember which town he was living in at the time. With her money they bought a house in Chicago. I've never been in their house, though I come through Chicago now and then. I don't even call. But every time I move he manages to track me down. It was his idea to meet at the airport during my layover.

I stop in front of him, put down my overnight bag. We hug briefly. He is still a big man, capable of crushing embraces. "Dad," I say, "aren't you a little old to be babysitting? Annie can't take care of her own kid?" Annie is Gina's daughter from her first marriage, who lives near them.

He looks at me oddly, as though I should know better. "This isn't Annie's daughter, Rick, this is my daughter." And then, as if that's all that needs to be said, he reaches down, picks up the child, and settles her securely against his hip. She looks a

little dazed up there, like she's just waking up, her gaze slowly shifting to his face. "Christine, this is your big brother Rick," my father tells her.

Christine and I look at each other doubtfully. She has black wavy hair and big brown eyes. She's wearing a yellow- and white-striped turtleneck under her corduroy overalls. She begins chewing on her fist. We both look back at my father.

I feel dizzy, hot under the insistent fluorescent lights. "Why didn't you tell me? What did you bring her here for?"

"I did tell you. I wrote you over a year ago, when she was born. You were living in Tucson."

I shake my head. "I was moving around a lot then. I never got the letter."

"I had no other way of getting in touch with you, Rick. You wouldn't give me your phone number."

"I didn't have one."

He is silent, as if taking me in for the first time. I meet his eyes then look away. "Well," he says, shifting Christine on his hip, "I thought maybe you didn't want to know. I brought Christine today anyway. I wanted you to meet each other."

Christine sticks her hand out to touch his face; he holds her fingers, wet with saliva, in his huge ones. "Da," she says, and he smiles down at her.

"How about a drink?" I ask.

He is swaying from side to side with her in a private dance. "I'm not taking Christine to a bar," he says without looking up. She is tiny, vulnerable in the vise of his enormous arms, and completely innocent of the danger. My father was never a gentle man. Even his affection was hard to recognize; when I was small he might pick me up to hug me or to shake me. I never knew which it would be. Hugging me, he might hold me so tight it would hurt. At night my father occasionally carried me to bed; he liked to pretend he was the giant in the fairy tale carrying Jack out of the castle to throw him off the edge of the cloud. He'd hold me above his head in his two massive hands, growling, "Fee fi fo fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman." My mother remained behind in the kitchen washing dinner dishes and scrubbing the counters clean, and letting him carry me off. In my room he'd toss me down on my bed, where I'd bounce once or twice, the box springs under the thin mattress squeaking. Most of the time he didn't even wait for me to scramble under the covers before switching off the light and leaving the room.

"Come on," I persist, "it's just an airport bar. They'll let you take her in."

"No, Rick. Anyway, I've stopped drinking."

"You're kidding." It's all I can think of to say. We start to walk down the wide hallway, but I'm only dimly aware of the streams of people pushing past us in both directions.

He shakes his head. "No. How about here?" The food court he's stopped in front of reminds me of all the school cafeterias I've ever eaten in. I shrug and we go in. My father insists on paying for my cheeseburger, fries, and 7-Up, maybe because he knows that I'm making more money at 26 than he has ever made. I let him pay.

The cafeteria is almost empty. I put my tray down at a long table sticky with spilled soda. We sit near the glass wall overlooking the runway. I am sweating. I take off my jacket and loosen and pull off my tie, fold them both and put them on top of my bag on the seat beside me. Christine is wide awake now and wants to explore. Dad stands her on the floor and holds her arms lightly while she practices walking. The sky through the tinted windows is a disturbing greenish-gray. When Christine gets tired and wants to crawl on the dirty carpet, my father lifts her back into her stroller, telling her she can play car and drive to the sandbox like mommy and she do. He crouches down and drives with her for a while, the two of them steering right, then left. I look away.

Christine finally falls asleep. My father sits across from me, picking at a callous on his hand, then staring at both hands resting on the table in front of him. They're still thick and course, still much larger than mine. I can't eat the rest of my hamburger. I push away the tray and look at my watch. I forgot to change it to this time zone. My plane leaves in forty minutes.

"Rick, your mother was in the hospital for five days before she died." I glance at my watch again, checking that I set it right. I didn't come here to have this conversation. But he goes on. "She rallied a little on...I think it was the third day, and we hoped for a while that she would make it. But she never regained consciousness. I was with her every day." I tip my waxed paper cup and shake the melting ice inside. "I thought you might want to know that," he adds.

I don't, but I ask, "How badly was she hurt?"

My father hesitates, then says, "The driver was speeding, he hit her head on. It's a wonder she wasn't killed instantly. Her lung was punctured, she had multiple breaks and lacerations, there were some other complications. Didn't I tell you that at the time?"

"You may have, I don't remember. I was pretty busy with school then." I know how this sounds to him, how it sounded then. The truth is that I was busy drinking every night, sometimes until I passed out, and the time I was in my dorm room I spent sleeping it off. I avoided the phone, and I managed to ignore and forget about the daily messages from my father that my roommates left me. Before her accident, it was my mother who would call me at school to tell me about my father's health or his complaints about his newest job. She called on nights my father had gone out. I could

hear reruns of “The Honeymooners” and “Gilligan’s Island” in the background. She never talked about herself. Once I suggested she invite a neighbor over sometime, and she asked what for. When I said it would be someone to talk to, she told me they would have nothing in common, and besides, what difference did it make if she and my father were just going to move again.

“Do you think she was in pain?” I ask. “In the hospital, I mean.”

My father glances at me, surprised, then leans back against the hard plastic seat. “I don’t know.” I expect him to say more, but he doesn’t.

I went to the funeral, of course. We were a sorry little gathering: me, my father, a handful of my mother’s relatives. I left immediately after. Later that spring I graduated from college. No one from my family attended. I stayed on the east coast through the summer, but by then I couldn’t stand to be in one place for very long, so I moved to San Diego for a while.

My father smiles a little and looks at me again. “Do you remember the first time the three of us went ice skating together? None of us had ever skated before. We kept colliding into each other. It was funny, not being able to turn, except when we didn’t mean to.” He chuckles. “Just like us to try something without taking lessons first,” he says, rubbing his eyes with his hand.

My head aches; I can’t focus clearly. I take off my glasses and pinch the bridge of my nose, then realize I am mirroring his gesture. I put my glasses back on. “I don’t remember that,” I tell him. “I remember sledding, not ice skating.” We were sledding the first time I felt real fear with my father. I was five or six years old. A foot of snow had fallen two nights before, and my father had just bought a new red plastic sled. We climbed to the top of a steep hill where no one else had been, leaving a trail in the crusty snow with our footprints. He scouted out a straight run between the trees. When I was settled my father sat down behind me, tucking his booted feet inside the sled next to my legs. He promised he would put his feet out to brake if we were going too fast. He pushed off. We went barreling down, gaining velocity, the trees zipping by on either side of us. Then we careened off a bump we hadn’t seen in the glare of sunlight and veered off course into the trees. I closed my eyes and yelled, “Stop us! Stop!” convinced we were going to crash. My father only clamped his legs tighter around me. I smelled the air’s crisp sharpness, heard the sled swooshing on the snow, tasted my own dry, sour breath. My father’s huge arms were around me, squeezing me tight to him, and I thought I could feel his heart thumping as hard as mine was. The sled smashed into the trunk of a thick tree. I was thrown hard, face first, into the snow. My arm throbbed underneath the bulk of his torso, and my face was numb with cold. I lay still, strangely happy, and waited for whatever would happen next.

He rolled over, and we lay on the snow staring at each other. Then he smiled at me. In my father’s face I saw the same pleasure that I felt spreading inside of me like warmth. He didn’t ask me if I was hurt. He didn’t have to ask if I had been scared. My

fear at some point had turned over into exhilaration, and I was certain that my father felt it too.

When my mother saw the cut on my forehead and the cracked glass in the left frame of my glasses, she looked at my father as if the sight of him pained her in some way. I knew then that I couldn't tell her about what had happened, even if I had known how. My father shrugged and went outside again to throw the broken sled into the garbage can behind the house, leaving her to clean my wound and bandage it. I didn't mind the sting of the ointment she used, but neither was I soothed by the cool, gentle touch of her fingers. Already I was waiting for the next time my father would take me away with him.

My father stares out at a plane taxiing away from us. His face looks bloated, eerie in the greenish light from the window. Maybe he is remembering the same day, because he says, "I'm sorry about some of that. I don't think I had any idea what I was doing back then."

"Do you now?" I ask.

My father smiles at me in a way I have never seen before; it makes his face soft and sad at the same time. He reaches out as if to touch my arm. I don't know what he means to do, and I draw my hand back. The smile leaves his face, but the sadness is still there.

"Let's go," he says. "Your plane leaves soon." He stands and maneuvers the stroller out to the hallway. I gather up my jacket and tie and bag. We don't say a word as we walk to the departure gate.

In the crowded waiting area we find an empty seat at the back, where two elderly women stand smoking a last cigarette. I tell my father I have been sitting all day and urge him to sit down, which he does.

Christine wakes up yawning. My father bends over her, sweeping her dark hair off her forehead. "You're sleepy today, aren't you? No more naps for you. We'll put you to bed early tonight."

"Remember putting me to bed, Dad?" I ask. Before he can answer I lift Christine out of her stroller and hold her above my head. She's heavier than I expected; I have to balance her like a tray. I stomp my feet. "Fee fi fo fum—"

Even before Christine starts screaming and kicking, my father is out of his chair pulling her down from my hands. He holds her gently while she cries and flails in the safety of his arms. "Shhhhh, it's all right. I've got you, shhhhh." My vision blurs. I can't catch my breath. It's exactly how I felt when my father dropped me on the ceiling of the Ferris wheel cage. The smokers are looking over at us. I sit down in the empty seat.

My father turns on me as soon as Christine quiets down. "What's wrong with you? Was that supposed to be fun?"

I don't know what to say.

He towers over me, cradling Christine. His face is splotted with red. We stare at each other. Then he turns and walks away.

Most of the other passengers have formed a line in front of the gate. Two flight attendants take their tickets, and they file through the door. After a while the boarding area is almost empty. Finally I stand, tuck my jacket and tie into my overnight bag, and pick up the empty stroller. I am explaining to the man behind the counter that someone will return for it when my father appears beside me. Christine is just barely awake, her head drooping on my father's shoulder.

"I'll take that," he says, holding out his free hand. I put it down on the floor. My father settles his daughter in the seat.

"I've got to get on the plane," I say while he is still crouched down, strapping her in with a seat belt he didn't use before.

We approach the gate. One of the flight attendants tears the boarding pass from my ticket and hands it back to me. My father and I stand together in silence. He rocks the stroller forward and back with one hand, the other in his pocket, and stares at the floor.

So I turn and stride down the corridor to my waiting plane.

My stomach heaves as the plane lurches through another air pocket, drops, then bounces up again abruptly. I pull at the neck of my unbuttoned shirt, but I still can't breathe. In my mind I keep seeing the plane diving down, flipping over, crashing on its back into the ground. The plane shudders, lurches again. Then, suddenly, it's over. We glide so smoothly that I can no longer feel the plane's precarious suspension over miles of empty air.

I draw in deep breaths until the nausea subsides. But the roiling in my chest won't go away. To distract myself I thumb through the airline magazine, stopping at the map that shows the flight routes. I've never noticed before that the time lines running through the country are completely arbitrary. They don't divide up the world like neat sections of an orange, as I always believed. They zigzag even more than the borders of states. I stuff the magazine back into the seat pocket, next to the air sickness bag.

Eventually I doze off. When the captain announces that we'll be landing in Seattle in ten minutes, I push up the window shade. Another city sprawls below, not much different from the one I left this morning. The plane begins its descent, tipping down and circling. I'm feeling better now. I adjust my watch for the second time today. Here on the west coast it's still afternoon. In Baltimore the sky is already dark, and Ariana is home from work. When I call her she'll ask how the visit with my father

went. I'll tell her that he never showed. After hanging up, I'll go out into the city in search of something I've never done before.

I look up. A flight attendant is asking me to fasten my seat belt. I nod, and she moves down the aisle. I leave the seat belt unbuckled beside me. As the plane veers to the left like a carnival ride revolving on an invisible axis, I lean with it, pulled inexorably toward the ground by my own forward momentum.